



## Archaeology at Fort Vancouver



### A Rich Archaeological Legacy

Fort Vancouver is a rich archaeological site. The buildings and stockade, the most visible parts of the national historic site, are accurate reconstructions based on archaeological evidence combined with historical research. While these reconstructions help bring the site to life, the remains of the real fort are buried in the ground. Broken dishes and bottles, nails, window glass, beads, wooden footings, and other artifacts are the tangible remnants of the people who lived, worked, and witnessed important events here. The large quantity and age of these artifacts, as well as the more than 50 years of archaeological investigations at the site, make Fort Vancouver the premier historical archaeological site in the Pacific Northwest.

### The Two Fort Vincouvers



*The reconstructed stockade has been built directly on top of the original. Though historic accounts offered different measurements, by finding the original posts archaeologists were able to discover the stockade's exact historic size and study modifications through time.*

There were two Hudson's Bay Company Fort Vincouvers. The first fort was only occupied for a short time (1825-1828). It was located on the bluff near the Washington State School for the Deaf, but it has never been formally recorded. The second fort was much larger, more significant, and was occupied for a much longer period of time (1829-1860). The stockade and each of the buildings in the current National Park Service (NPS) reconstruction have been built on their exact historic locations.

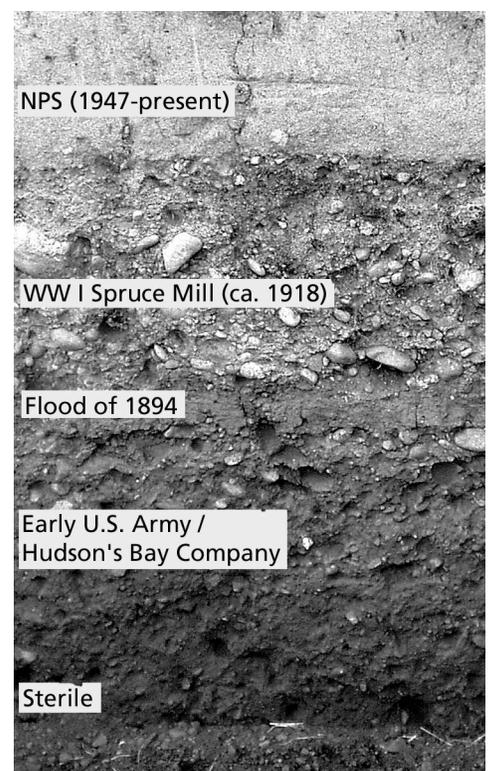
Fort Vancouver was rediscovered in 1947 by National Park Service archaeologist Louis Caywood. He used the few crude maps of the site to find the approximate location of the Fort, then excavated trenches to locate the stockade walls. He also found the foundations for many of the buildings.

### Layers of History in the Soil

Since 1947, many archaeological projects have been conducted. Scientists have uncovered and documented the layers of history that comprise Fort Vancouver and the Vancouver National Historic Reserve. Many features remain from the U.S. Army use of the site, including the quartermaster's depot and dwellings from the earliest years of Vancouver Barracks. The site also contains the gravel fill and ballast from railroad lines associated with the WWI Spruce Mill (1917-1918). During the 1930s, the regional headquarters of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was here, and materials from barracks used to house and train CCC workers are routinely found.

Other layers are natural in origin. The flood of 1894 was the largest in recorded Columbia River history, and left a distinctive band of silt. Below the silt, intact layers are found with artifacts left by the site's 19th century occupants. Sometimes prehistoric American Indian artifacts are discovered. Beneath the archaeological deposits is "sterile" sediment that was deposited before human occupation of the site, and which contains no cultural materials.

*The stratigraphy, or layers of soil, at Fort Vancouver were deposited in this general pattern (right). The depth of an artifact can help determine the date of its burial.*



## The Science of Historical Archaeology

Historical archaeologists rarely find things of much intrinsic value, such as coins or gold. Usually they are left with those things that were intentionally left behind - the broken bits and pieces of the past that represent people's trash and garbage. These fractured remains, however, represent a remarkable treasure of information. They tell the story of what people did, bought, manufactured, used, and ate.

Archaeology provides a very unique view of history. Historians look at written records - books, letters, diaries, inventories - to try to understand what happened in the past. At Fort Vancouver, these records were primarily written by the officers of the fort. For many of the workers and their families there is no recorded history. Archaeologists can use their finds to compare with what historians have interpreted based on the historical record. They can also discover new information about things where history is mute or poorly understood, including aspects of the lives of the working class employees and their families who lived in the Village.



*Portland State University students dig and screen for artifacts at the site of the Sale Shop, a retail outlet which sold goods to Fort Vancouver employees, local settlers, missionaries, and other visitors.*

By mapping the distribution of artifacts and analyzing their properties, archaeologists are able to learn about the past. In order to gather information about a resource, archaeologists often have to excavate a site. When artifacts are removed from the ground they lose their context. Consequently, archaeologists must dig slowly, taking careful notes on where artifacts come from and what is found with them. As a site is excavated, there is only one chance to accurately record all the data, in order for the information to be studied in its context later.

Looting destroys a site because it disturbs the context of all artifacts in the search for a few. It prevents archaeologists from accurately reconstructing past events and takes history away from all of us. For this reason, **city, state, and federal laws prohibit unauthorized digging and metal detectors** on the Vancouver National Historic Reserve, including Fort Vancouver National Historic Site. If you see anyone digging or using a metal detector on the site, please contact a park ranger or call 911.



*These artifacts were found during recent excavations. The wrought iron key was found at the location of a house in the Village, as was the inlaid glass button. The ring setting was found at the site of the Sale Shop.*

## Non-Destructive Archaeology Techniques

Remote sensing technologies, such as magnetometry and ground-penetrating radar, help archaeologists at the Vancouver National Historic Reserve search for buried sites without physically disrupting the ground. These techniques look at variations in the earth's magnetic field or send radar waves into the ground and record their reflections. Maps of magnetic anomalies and radar reflections can show underground features like hearths or architectural remains that can direct the efforts of archaeologists. These techniques are especially useful for sensitive areas in which excavation is not an option.

*A magnetometer can create a picture of underground resources without the need for excavation, by mapping differences in magnetic signatures.*



## Sharing Archaeology with the Public



*Kids Digs give children a chance to be Junior Archaeologists by excavating mock units, recording their finds, and interpreting what artifacts mean.*

Archaeologists uncover the buried history of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve, augmenting the historical record and learning new and unexpected things about the past. Just as important as doing archaeology is sharing it with the public, shareholders in this national park. You are welcome to visit the Fur Store, where archaeologists are analyzing the latest finds. Periodically, ranger-led walking tours explore the archaeological heritage of Fort Vancouver and other areas of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve. Special rotating exhibits highlight different aspects of the collection. Kids Digs, hands-on archaeology training courses for children, are offered during the summer season. If you are lucky when you visit, there will be an archaeological dig going on. Feel free to visit the excavation site, and ask the archaeologists about what they are finding. We hope you will think about the traces of the past that lie beneath your feet when visiting this site, and the ways in which we learn about the rich legacy that remains.